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SUBJECT: DINNER WITH A WAFDIST: ANATOMY OF THE DIRTY
UNDERBELLY OF ELECTIONS IN EGYPT

REF: CAIRO 3029

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: At a recent dinner with lawyer and leading opposition Wafd party member Essam Shiha, who plans to run in a December 26 parliamentary by-election for a vacant seat in the People's Assembly, we were given a look into the realities of playing politics in Egypt, replete with tales of vote-buying, party financing woes, bribes, and dealing with the government's security services. End summary.

12. (C) Shiha is the Wafd party's legal advisor, and an up-and-comer among its leadership team. He is running for the now-vacant seat of MP Shahinaz Naggar, in the Manial district of Cairo (Note: Naggar is a former beauty queen turned MP, who recently resigned from the People's Assembly due to her marriage to steel baron and NDP heavyweight Ahmed Ezz. End note). According to Shiha, the NDP is split internally over who to run for the job - Naggar's personal secretary, who is supported by Ezz, or an "old guard" NDP member. Shiha wants Wafd to run a candidate, and he wants to be that candidate. He thinks that, given press attention to Naggar's resignation, this will be a high-profile election, and that by participating, the Wafd could draw attention to its "new" leadership line-up and policies, and capitalize on what he claimed is a revived interest among Egyptians in the Wafd party, an after-effect of the hugely popular Ramadan serial on King Farouk, in which several historical Wafd party members figured prominently (reftel).

13. (C) Shiha is having trouble getting the party to agree to run anyone in the election. Knowing that the near-inevitable result is a loss to the NDP candidate, the Wafd does not want to provide any financial support to a candidate of its own, preferring to save money for the spring 2008 local elections. But Shiha is set on running, either with Wafd's financing or not. An idealist of sorts, Shiha is determined that the solution to Egypt's problems is that individual Egyptians take personal responsibility, and "stand up and try to change something!" The problem is, in order to even contest the election, he needs serious money.

14. (C) When Naggar ran for this seat, credible press reporting was that she paid between LE 100-1,000 per vote (approximately USD 20-200), so Shiha knows voters will be expecting comparable compensation this time around. He has started campaigning, but sadly noted that, when people cluster around him in the crowded shisha cafes endemic to downtown Cairo, their first question is not, "What is your policy on subsidies? Or judicial independence?" but rather, "How much will you pay me to vote for you?" He commented that every evening he even needs to pay off the owners of the cafes where he is pressing the flesh with, and buying shishas and dinner for, potential voters, as they take a "risk" with the state's security services by allowing an opposition party

candidate to stump on their turf.

¶5. (C) Shiha related how a personal childhood friend of his is now a "big boss" in the Manial neighborhood, and told him he could provide 500 voters for him, but before doing so, he needed Shiha to get an officer from the State Security Investigative Services (SSIS) to call him to say that is permissible ("You understand, my friend, I just need to cover my own back"). Shiha noted how Wafd leaders normally have to go to SSIS prior to an election, "bowing and scraping," trying to cut deals so some of their candidates will be permitted to win. He said that Wafd president Mahmoud Abaza "is not giving him good signals," about running in this election. Shiha thinks this is in part because SSIS has told Wafd they should not contest the election, and exploit any potential split in the NDP, should the NDP not resolve its internal dispute about the race, and end up running two candidates.

¶6. (C) Comment: None of what Shiha related is surprising or new, but it serves as a useful reminder of the realities of playing politics in Egypt. Also striking is the determination and courage of Shiha and other similar opposition politicians and civil society activists, who are willing, at sometimes great personal cost, to challenge the state and the NDP party machine.

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